

An Honors Thesis

By

Christine M. Hough

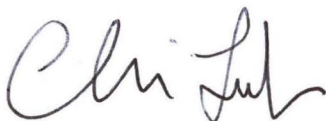
Second Life: An Experience in Virtual Foreign Language Education

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

Christine M. Hough

Dr. Christopher Luke

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Luke", with a stylized, cursive script.

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Abstract

Evolving technology inevitably leads to an evolving foreign language classroom. Important questions need to be answered about the merits and demerits of incorporating various technological tools into the curriculum, and the use of virtual worlds, such as Second Life, is one such new approach to teaching a second language. This paper is a reflection following a semester of implementing the program Second Life into the Spanish curriculum of college-level students to observe the pros and cons of using this technology in language learning. Students formed small groups to perform various tasks within the virtual world of Second Life, "traveling" to Spanish-speaking countries and other locations to learn more about the world around them. Each group communicated entirely in Spanish during these tasks, with an effort to improve communication skills in the target language without the usual pressures of performing in real life. While students will always benefit from being exposed to culture in more creative and realistic ways, the technology that makes this possible may also cause significant problems for many students. These advantages and disadvantages, specifically related to the use of Second Life, are evaluated and discussed in this reflective paper.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Lisa Kuriscak for the opportunity to participate in this Honors College Fellowship and for her support and supervision throughout this project. Her previous research and experience with Second Life was a great help to me as I worked with her students using this program.

I would like to thank Dr. Christopher Luke for both introducing me to Second Life and agreeing to oversee this thesis. He also helped me learn to navigate Second Life and learn how to use some of the more complicated features in the program.

I would like to thank Dr. Kuriscak's Spanish 202 students for the fall semester of 2009. Their participation in Second Life activities and honest feedback were invaluable to this project.

Introduction

Throughout my time as an undergraduate student at Ball State University pursuing a degree in Spanish Education, I have been exposed to numerous theories and opinions regarding the use of technology in foreign language education. Many an educator has posed important and complicated questions regarding this topic—*How much technology in the classroom is too much? How technology-savvy do students and teachers need to be? When does technology enhance the learning of a second language, and when does it hinder this complex process?* My sophomore year, I took a course entitled Technology and Assessment in Foreign Language (FL396) which invited me to experiment with current technologies and practice how to use them effectively in a classroom setting. This experience peaked my interest on the merits and demerits of using technology in acquiring a second language, and I decided to concentrate my undergraduate creative project on this very issue. As a young teacher who is preparing to go out into the educational community, I want to be able to contribute to the growing dialogue and offer my own experiences to inform foreign language educators about technology as it affects our students' learning process—a growing reality that should not be ignored.

One specific way of incorporating technology into the foreign language classroom is through the use of virtual reality. Students can actually create a computer-generated character, called an avatar, that they manipulate and control according to their own desires within a computer program that simulates real life. In essence, virtual reality can transport students to another place in a virtual sense, allowing them to experience what they would not normally be able to experience in real life. This is, of course, a relatively new advancement in technology—one that far surpasses the use of chat-based programs in its complexity. It is also an advancement that

cannot be easily implemented into high school foreign language curriculums at this point in time, due to budget constraints and a general lack of training for teachers in the use of this type of technology. However, it is an intriguing part of technological advancement that is worth pursuing and evaluating for its effectiveness and potential for future widespread use in the classroom.

The purpose of this paper is not, however, to broadly research and evaluate the use of virtual reality in foreign language education. This is an important concept to research and consider, but one that I am not able to fully develop at this time. Rather, I would like to focus on recounting my semester-long experience as an undergraduate fellow for the Ball State Honors College, a position which allowed me to work directly with four sections of Spanish 202 students, implementing virtual reality in the curriculum via the program Second Life (SL). I was able to gain valuable experience during this time, which has, in many ways, shaped my views on the use of this type of technology (among others) in foreign language education.

Two of my professors, Dr. Lisa M. Kuriscak and Dr. Christopher Luke, are also interested in the use of virtual reality in teaching a second language and have both used SL to various degrees with their undergraduate Spanish courses, in addition to performing more extensive research to investigate this method of teaching. My position as an undergraduate fellow put me working under Dr. Kuriscak's supervision with her Spanish 202 classes, with whom she had already begun to introduce SL as part of the semester's syllabus. The idea of working with these students, who were also my peers, was exciting to me as I considered what I would be able to learn from being able to observe first-hand their attitudes and performance levels with this type

of technology. In addition, the fact that I am “in the same boat” as many of the students that I had the opportunity to work with—working towards my undergraduate degree and taking classes within Ball State’s Modern Languages and Classics Department—allowed me to achieve honest dialogue with these students. They did not see me as a professor, or feel that their semester grades might be in jeopardy if they were to tell me the truth about how they felt in regards to the use of SL in the curriculum. They seemed to find it easy to be sincere and straightforward in communicating with me, which was a significant advantage during this experience.

Before beginning to interact directly with students using SL, I formed a general hypothesis about how they would respond to using this technology: *Students will enjoy working within Second Life as a way to acquire a second language, given the high aptitude that many young people have for using advanced technology.* My hypothesis was not based upon how their language skills would change; rather, it focused on what their attitudes would reflect regarding enjoyment of the learning process after the semester ended. This hypothesis was, in part, affected by my own bias as a student of the same age and general technological skill level. I knew that I would have enjoyed the opportunity to learn how to work with a program similar to SL, if only for the break it would give me from mindless textbook drills! I assumed that most other students would share my relative enthusiasm for this way of learning and improving effective Spanish communication skills.

Process

The first step for all students in these Spanish 202 classes was taking a pre-test that was created by Dr. Luke and Dr. Kuriscak to assess several different aspects of individual personality,

language ability and confidence level, and attitudes towards the use of technology for general educational purposes. This test would be compared to a parallel post-test given at the end of the semester which would help to gauge how student opinions and stance on the use of technology, and specifically the use of virtual worlds like SL, had changed over the course of the semester's activities.

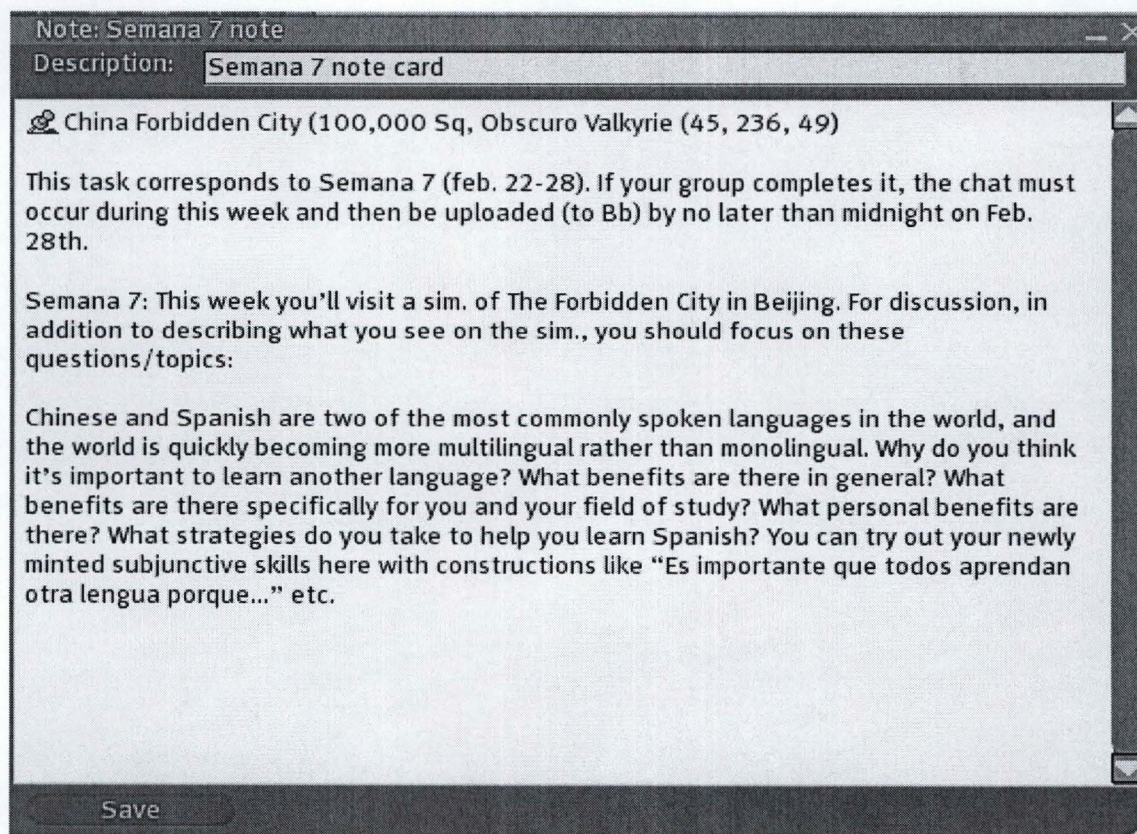
Before I began to work with Dr. Kuriscak's students, they were given a crash course in learning to use SL, after which they were told to download the program onto their computers (or learn to operate the program in a university computer lab, if their operating system could not support the software). This crash course gave them basic knowledge and skills in navigating this virtual world, including instructions on creating and modifying their personal avatars, traveling from one virtual location (or "island") within SL to another, and using chat-based communication with one another. Students then formed small groups of three to four people and were required to virtually "meet" on Ball State's Languages Island within SL (a virtual space purchased by the university) once per week to perform various activities. The ultimate goal of these meetings was to provide students with opportunities to use Spanish to communicate with one another on a regular basis in a non-threatening environment.

My role in working with these students involved meeting with them on the SL island to both participate in activities with them and to evaluate their use of the language. For the first half of the semester, all student groups signed up to meet with me in SL for two separate thirty-minute appointments. During these appointments, I would complete a specified task alongside these students within SL, communicating solely in Spanish as we traveled to different places within this virtual domain. These tasks were previously created by Dr. Kuriscak as she worked with

classes in earlier semesters, and they involve the whole group in a virtual challenge—anything from traveling to a version of Chichen Itzá in virtual Mexico to an ecotourism trip in virtual Africa—all to be completed while speaking (or, perhaps more accurately, chatting) in the target language. To view an example of a typical weekly group task, see *Task Sample 1* below.

Most of the time, the thirty-minute meetings would be broken up in this way: For the first five minutes, the students would arrive to SL and we would all view the week's task together. After this, for the next ten to fifteen minutes, the students and I would teleport to the specified location within SL to tour the island and observe buildings and other artifacts pertinent to our task. Finally, we returned to the Ball State Languages Island for the last ten minutes of each

Task Sample 1:



session to have a (chat-based, or typed) discussion in Spanish. While this was not a rigid format to be followed every week with each group, this was the most common time allotment of each thirty-minute appointment.

The focus of each individual task was entirely different, which meant that the group's tour of the specified island and the resulting discussion were also varied. Some weeks, the goal was simply for students to have the experience of "traveling" to another country, and discussion would revolve around the feelings associated with this exciting event in a person's real life. Other times, the focus was for students to practice a certain grammatical skill, which meant that the location of the task might be less important (i.e. not necessarily a Spanish-speaking country), but the follow-up discussion would lend itself to using new verb tenses or relevant vocabulary. Ultimately, the goal of each task was for students to practice communicating with one another in the target language.

Although I acted as each group's evaluator, I did not seek to distinguish my role from the students' roles during these meetings. I did not want students to view me as the main contributor to the conversation, or as a teacher who would direct their conversations with one another. I was much more interested in observing their dialogue with one another in an effort to see how they would interact with one another in this virtual setting. With this goal in mind, I attempted to spark conversation and leave the bulk of the dialogue to them whenever possible. While some groups had a more difficult time with this than others, most of the students seemed to be able to make conversation with one another without a problem. Some students even found spots on the Ball State Languages Island where they could direct their avatars to sit down at a table or on a

couch to have a conversation together, making it seem like a much more “real life” meeting. The tasks were excellent conversation starters, and students were able to talk about a wide variety of topics from week to week.

At the end of each appointment, I evaluated students with a simple checkmark system. If the student arrived in SL on time and contributed significantly to the group’s conversation, he received a $\sqrt{+}$. If the student showed up late to the meeting and/or spoke minimally during the conversation, he received a $\sqrt{}$. If the student did not show up to the group’s meeting and/or did not contribute to the group discussion at all, he received a $\sqrt{-}$. After evaluating each student, I sent the scores to Dr. Kuriscak, who then used these scores as a part of the students’ grades.

For the second half of the semester, I created a project for the students to complete as part of their final semester grade. First, I learned how to construct physical objects within SL, a skill that allowed me to design a virtual *tapas* bar on the Ball State Languages Island for my students to use. After this was complete, students were asked to work within their groups to write and perform a skit for me to evaluate. All skits needed to take place at the *tapas* bar that I had created, and students were asked to write characters that would typically be seen in a restaurant setting. For example, if one group of students had four members, they might choose two people to play the part of a frazzled server, one person to be an angry customer, and another person to be the comical chef. Evaluation was based on several criteria, including member participation and language use, which can be viewed in detail on the accompanying rubric on the following page. This project was meant to be a culmination of the skills that students had acquired over the course of the semester, both in usage of Spanish and in ability to interact with one another in SL.

Second Life Skit Rubric

	Distinguished 3	Proficient 2	Basic 1	Unsatisfactory 0	Score
Skit Presentation and Participation	Student arrives promptly to Second Life and is a crucial contributor and participant throughout the skit and feedback session.	Student arrives promptly to Second Life and contributes to the performance of the skit. Student participates a few times during the feedback session.	Student arrives promptly to Second Life and gives limited contribution and participation to the skit and the feedback session.	Student does not arrive promptly to Second Life and gives little to no contribution and participation to the skit and feedback session.	
Vocabulary Usage	Student uses a wide range of vocabulary and is consistently able to form cohesive, complex sentences.	Student uses a fairly wide range of vocabulary and is able to form some cohesive, complex sentences.	Student uses a basic range of vocabulary and forms a few somewhat cohesive, complex sentences.	Student uses a limited range of vocabulary and does not form any complex sentences.	
Grammatical Accuracy	Student conjugates the majority of verbs correctly and shows a comprehensive understanding of grammar patterns and rules.	Student conjugates most verbs correctly and is able to demonstrate basic knowledge of major grammar patterns and rules.	Student conjugates about half of verbs correctly and follows some of the major grammar patterns and rules.	Student conjugates most verbs incorrectly and does not follow basic grammar patterns and rules.	
Peer Evaluation	Student has been a crucial group member; initiates communication with group members, offers many ideas, and helps in the creation of the skit.	Student has been a cooperative group member; communicates with group members, offers a few ideas, and helps in the creation of the skit.	Student has been a moderate group member; responds to communication with group members, offers some opinions, and gives limited help in the creation of the skit.	Student has been an unengaged group member; does not communicate with group members, offers no ideas or opinions, and gives no help in creation of the skit.	

For this final assessment, student groups were again directed to schedule a thirty-minute appointment with me. This time, students used the first fifteen minutes for performing their skit while I stood to the side to watch and take note of their interactions and language use. After the

skit was finished, students gathered around me to hear my feedback, which was usually given to them by copy-pasting sections of their skit dialogue that were well-written, or that needed to be re-visited and corrected. This feedback section lasted approximately ten minutes, after which the final five minutes was given to the students to re-perform sections of the skit that needed to be adjusted. This process allowed students to receive an immediate response from me and to correct their mistakes only minutes after performing the skit. To view an example of this feedback, see *Feedback Sample 1* below. It seemed that students appreciated this time to recognize their mistakes and make note of common errors in their speech.

Feedback Sample 1

[15:15] Christy Mexicola: As far as your use of Spanish, good job forming complex sentences and using some difficult verb forms. You had some subjunctive (Carmen: Espero que sea cortés) and some present perfect (Ramon: He visto; Hemos descubierto) and some commands (Kitty: Cómalo) etc... great!

[15:15] Carmen Lomes: good!

[15:15] Kitty Mofanui: Gracias!

[15:15] Carmen Lomes: we worked hard translating

...

[15:15] Christy Mexicola: I can definitely tell you put a lot of work into it. Great!

[15:15] Christy Mexicola: Here are some things to work on:

[15:15] Carmen Lomes: we really did. thank you! we are happy that you were able to see that!

[15:16] Kitty Mofanui: It was fun to be able to meet and practice.

[15:16] Christy Mexicola: First of all, remember the difference between ser and estar. Can someone tell me what this sentence should say instead? [Kitty: Soy feliz para Ramon y Josie)

[15:16] Carmen Lomes: should be estar?

[15:16] Kitty Mofanui: Estoy?

[15:16] Ramon Firecaster: shouldn't it be be estoy since they aren't always happy?

[15:16] Christy Mexicola: Yep, estoy is correct in this case. Remember, estar is for temporary things, like emotions.

[15:17] Christy Mexicola: Also, I have a question. Have you all been working with subjunctive recently in class?

[15:17] Kitty Mofanui: Darn! I knew that.

[15:17] Carmen Lomes: i don't like estar and ser. so confusing.

[15:17] Carmen Lomes: yes we have a little...

[15:17] Kitty Mofanui: We just started
[15:17] Ramon Firecaster: We just started practicing wiht it I believe
[15:17] Carmen Lomes: we just started the past subjunctive but we are still learning.
[15:17] Christy Mexicola: Because kind of a funny thing happened... you actually started to overuse the subjunctive, when all you really need is the present tense.
[15:18] Christy Mexicola: Here's an example: [Kitty: Aquí venga Josie ahora.] What should that be?
[15:18] Josie Quinote: oh we thought we were supposed to utilize the information from class
[15:18] Ramon Firecaster: Aqui viene
[15:18] Ramon Firecaster: ??
[15:18] Christy Mexicola: No, I don't mean overuse as in used it too much, but rather tried to use it incorrectly instead of using regular indicative.
[15:19] Christy Mexicola: Yes, aquí viene is correct. Good!

Pros and Cons of the Experience

Working with students in Second Life gave me an important opportunity to see technology in action in a foreign language classroom. Through making appointments and meeting with student groups, as well as evaluating the final skits, I observed several pros and cons of using this virtual world as part of the semester's curriculum for these Spanish classes. I must admit that my initial predictions on how students would react to using SL for learning a second language were not entirely accurate. I will first discuss the cons of my experience and then talk about the pros of working in SL throughout the semester.

To begin with, the general scheduling and appointment system with these students was extremely difficult at times. As previously stated, each group was asked to sign up for two half hour time slots with me in SL. These appointments, however, were scheduled up to six weeks ahead of time, which meant that students' schedules would often change during this time period. This caused several students to approach me and ask if they could reschedule their group's meeting

time with me due to one or more people not being able to make the original time commitment. As I was meeting with twenty-five different groups (almost 100 students) at different times, re-scheduling was not an easy task. Within student groups this caused problems as well, as there were several instances where one or two people in the group needed to reschedule while the other members wanted to keep the original appointment. These scheduling conflicts are an inevitable part of using any type of computer program where students have to be online at the same time, and it seemed that this may have been the most common (and, at times, the most frustrating) aspect of using SL as part of the curriculum, both for the students and for me.

In addition, even when students did keep their original appointments with me, it was common for students to sign into SL a full five to ten minutes after the appointment was scheduled to begin. This was caused by a number of factors—slow computers that had to run updates, forgetful students, unexpected delays—but it was definitely a setback that seemed to occur fairly frequently. To view a typical example of this, see *Chat Sample 1* below.

Since each time allotment was only thirty minutes, even four to five minutes tardiness affected the entire meeting. The students that did arrive on time were ready to teleport to the appointed

Chat Sample 1

[16:14] Christy Mexicola: Are your other group members headed this way?

[16:14] Juanita Blaylock: oh, sorry. hi...one is sitting next to me. Martinique should be here soon.

[16:15] Christy Mexicola: Okay. Are there just 3 of you?

[16:15] Juanita Blaylock: si

[16:17] Christy Mexicola: You guys just let me know when you are starting your skit.

[16:19] Juanita Blaylock: Our other member thought it was at 815...i just textedher so hopefully she'll be here soon. sorry.

island, but if the entire group teleported without waiting for the group member that did not arrive on time, that member would not know where to find the rest of the group. This meant that I often had to stay behind at the Ball State Languages Island (the default meeting place for all groups) to direct the late student on where to teleport to find his or her group members. A few separate times, groups were separated at the beginning of the appointment because of one or two group members' late arrival and were unable to locate one another for the rest of the appointment. Obviously, this was confusing and frustrating for the group members that had arrived to SL on time for their appointment.

Another con of this type of virtual interaction is the different ability levels that students have with this use of technology, as well as the different levels of accessibility for each student. This seemed to present an unfair advantage to students that were accustomed to working in programs like SL or who owned computers that could support the program. For example, one student might be extremely proficient in the Spanish language, but also have a difficult time working in virtual worlds. He may not have been exposed to this type of technology before, in addition to never taking a keyboarding class which limits his chatting abilities during group tasks as he is a slow typer. This student may also use an older desktop computer which does not have the capability to download and run SL. Because of this, he must drive to a Ball State computer lab each week in order to meet with his group. On the other hand, another student may have difficulty communicating in Spanish, but she is extremely proficient in the use of a variety of computer technologies and advancements. It takes this student little to no time to learn how to interact with others in SL, and she owns a new laptop that can run the program with no problems.

This student needs only to be in a location with an Internet connection—her dorm room, a restaurant, a friend's house—to access SL and participate in group meetings. It is clear that the first student will not perform as well for group tasks and discussions as the second student, even though the first student might actually be more proficient in the Spanish language.

This difference between extremely technologically-savvy students and barely technologically-proficient students (there were some of each!) presented problems during group meetings as well. Second Life is a complex program that allows each user's avatar to simulate real actions within each island, but these actions can be distracting if the user does not understand how to correctly use the program. On the Ball State Languages Island, for example, there is a part of the island where the avatars can actually mount a surf board and virtually surf the surrounding water. If students accidentally activated this feature, this resulted in a confusing chat exchange between group members. This happened at times with students who were confused on how to correctly use the program along with all of its advanced features. See *Chat Sample 2* below to view a typical example of the confusion caused by accidentally misusing the program.

Chat Sample 2

[16:08] Christy Mexicola: Follow me!
[16:08] Celia Greybeard: how
[16:09] Lilly Massivitus: oops
[16:09] Christy Mexicola: Is Blake in your group?
[16:09] Quazze Firehawk: yes
[16:09] Celia Greybeard: si
[16:09] Christy Mexicola: (Haha, Lilly, don't worry about it :-))
[16:09] Valentino Canonmill: Yes
[16:09] Bora Windsurfer Red: Don't touch the board...get your own at Bora Bora Isles
[16:10] Bora Windsurfer Red: Don't touch the board...get your own at Bora Bora Isles
[16:10] Christy Mexicola: Will he know where to go?
[16:10] Bora Windsurfer Red: Don't touch the board...get your own at Bora Bora Isles

[16:10] Celia Greybeard: no
[16:10] Bora Windsurfer Red: Don't touch the board...get your own at Bora Bora Isles
[16:10] Bora Windsurfer Red: Don't touch the board...get your own at Bora Bora Isles
[16:10] Bora Windsurfer Red: Don't touch the board...get your own at Bora Bora Isles
[16:10] Christy Mexicola: Okay, one of you go get him when he gets here.
[16:12] Valentino Canonmill: ¿Le apetece una copa?
[16:13] Christy Mexicola: (Have you started your skit?)
[16:13] Valentino Canonmill: No
[16:13] Salsa Together 9 - Abranimations whispers: Say /7show or /7hide to make these couples animation balls visible/invisible.
[16:13] Christy Mexicola: Okay. Let me know when you're ready!
[16:13] Salsa Together 9 - Abranimations whispers: Say /7show or /7hide to make these couples animation balls visible/invisible.

Specifically for the final skit assignment, a significant con of using SL, as opposed to performing skits in a real classroom, was the lack of accountability. There was no way for me to know if students had prepared ahead of time for this assignment or if they were simply coming up with lines as they went and typing them into an online translator to transfer over to SL. In addition, for the group tasks at the beginning of the semester as well, there was no guarantee that the avatars were being controlled by their actual real life person. It would have been easy for a student to ask a friend or classmate to sign into SL with his username and password and act as if he was the one participating. These accountability issues are not unique to SL, but would be common with any computer-based assessment that involves students meeting online to chat.

Although these cons did cause problems throughout the semester, there were also considerable pros to using SL with these students. The most obvious, and also the most important, of these pros is the ability that these students had while using this program to “travel” to places that they may never get to see in real life. Especially for foreign language students, it is important for teachers do everything they can to expose students to the cultures of various people groups that

speak the target language. This is no easy task, as financial concerns and other issues prevent many students from actually traveling abroad, even as part of a school-sponsored trip. Therefore, being able to use programs like SL is extremely beneficial for students as they are able to see virtual versions of many famous places around the world. As I met with these students to complete tasks, we teleported to Mexico, Africa, China, and many other simulated countries. Students were not limited to the weekly task, either—they had the freedom to explore islands that are interesting to them and, if possible, attempt to begin conversations with native Spanish speakers.

One example stands out to me specifically as a task that was made much more enjoyable and interesting for the students and for me by the fun that we had exploring the island. We teleported to a place in Africa that allowed the avatars to actually ride in a hot air balloon that toured the entire island, showing off its beautiful mountainous landscape with waterfalls in all directions. The conversation topic for this task revolved around ecotourism and wildlife, and the scene that surrounded us in this virtual world served the purpose of motivating us to discuss this topic. Conversation was easy and the half hour time period passed by quickly. To view an excerpt from this particular task with the students, see *Chat Sample 3* below.

Chat Sample 3

[2009/11/04 15:09] Africa Hot Air Balloon Tour 2.2 whispers: Welcome To Africa! Whether to want to explore, watch the sunset or dance under the African stars we hope you enjoy!
[2009/11/04 15:09] Carmen Lomes: MUY BIEN!!!!
[2009/11/04 15:09] Kitty Mofanui: Vamos!
[2009/11/04 15:09] Carmen Lomes: ah haha
[2009/11/04 15:09] Josie Quinote: Me gusta esta
[2009/11/04 15:10] Balloon: All Aboard, Leaving in 10 seconds...

[2009/11/04 15:10] Christy Mexicola: Un lugar perfecto para hablar!
[2009/11/04 15:10] Carmen Lomes: muchas animales!
[2009/11/04 15:10] Josie Quinote: si si
[2009/11/04 15:10] Kitty Mofanui: Si!
[2009/11/04 15:10] Carmen Lomes: muy romantico tambien
[2009/11/04 15:10] Christy Mexicola: Jaja, verdad!
[2009/11/04 15:10] Kitty Mofanui: Estoy de acuerdo.
[2009/11/04 15:10] Josie Quinote: ¿Cuál es tu parte favorita de África?
[2009/11/04 15:10] Carmen Lomes: me gusta todos los animales
[2009/11/04 15:10] Christy Mexicola: A mi me gustan las cascadas.
[2009/11/04 15:10] Kitty Mofanui: Mi parte favorita de África es de los animales.
[2009/11/04 15:10] Ramon Firecaster: Me gusta todos los animales

By contrast, a normal in-class discussion about this topic without the use of SL would probably fizzle, with many students becoming quickly distracted and unable to connect to the task at hand. Being able to actually experience the culture and be virtually present in the specified location was an undeniable benefit of using SL for these students.

The use of SL also gave my students the opportunity to get out of their normal classroom routine and experience the Spanish language in a much more engaging way. Aside from being able to teleport to various islands, students were asked to use Spanish to communicate with one another at all times while using SL, which provided excellent practice and forced students to expand the limits of their language abilities. In a typical classroom setting, students often demonstrate ability level in the target language by completing individual activities and assessments that do not allow them to practice authentic communication skills. I observed my students taking risks with their language use to communicate ideas to one another, whether or not the grammar and vocabulary was perfect (which it often was not). This lowering of the affective filter is a tremendous benefit that SL and other similar programs, even those that are simply chat-based, can provide for

students. The focus of our meetings in SL was solely to encourage participation, at least initially, in order to help students feel more comfortable using the target language to communicate. To view a typical conversation among students that demonstrates the students' willingness to communicate with one another in the target language without falling back on English (as is the habit of most foreign language students in the classroom), see *Chat Sample 4* below.

Chat Sample 4

[2009/10/29 13:20] Christy Mexicola: José me gustan tus ideas de los viajes al espacio. Crees que va a ser posible vivir en la luna o en otros planetas en el futuro?

[2009/10/29 13:20] Dick Razorfen: Si mucho

[2009/10/29 13:21] Jose Rexerzon: Si, pienso es possible en Mars.

[2009/10/29 13:21] Emilio Drascol: no creo que es possible

[2009/10/29 13:21] Jose Rexerzon: Pero, no creo que en la luna.

[2009/10/29 13:22] Christy Mexicola: He oído que alguien ha descubierto agua en Mars.

[2009/10/29 13:22] Emilio Drascol: usted cree que hay extraterrestres

[2009/10/29 13:22] Nacho Wizardly: No creo que hayamos ido a la luna.

[2009/10/29 13:23] Dick Razorfen: Creo que podría vivir en la luna si la tierra se a más pobladas

[2009/10/29 13:23] Jose Rexerzon: Si. Agua es muy importante.

[2009/10/29 13:23] Christy Mexicola: Y ahora Pluto no es planeta. Que triste.

[2009/10/29 13:24] Emilio Drascol: sin agua no tiene vida

[2009/10/29 13:24] Emilio Drascol: recuerdo que cuando Platoera un planeta

[2009/10/29 13:24] Nacho Wizardly: Es a las pequenas

[2009/10/29 13:25] Jose Rexerzon: Pero, los gentes puede hacer Oxygen con tecnologia.

[2009/10/29 13:25] Emilio Drascol: **pluto

[2009/10/29 13:25] Jose Rexerzon: Pluto no es un planet.

[2009/10/29 13:25] Jose Rexerzon: planeta*

[2009/10/29 13:26] Dick Razorfen: Si tuviera el dinero me iría a espacio ahora

[2009/10/29 13:26] Nacho Wizardly: Cual es tu planeta favorito?

[2009/10/29 13:26] Jose Rexerzon: Es un grand rock.

[2009/10/29 13:26] Dick Razorfen: mi favorito Saturn

[2009/10/29 13:26] Jose Rexerzon: grande.

[2009/10/29 13:27] Christy Mexicola: Me gusta Jupiter. Es muy grande.

[2009/10/29 13:27] Nacho Wizardly: Mi favorito es Saturn.

Student Opinions

At the end of my experience working with students in SL, I wanted to talk to as many of them as possible to get an accurate picture of how they perceived SL as a means of improving their Spanish skills. From interacting with them first-hand for an entire semester, I had witnessed several frustrated outbursts and annoyed groups that were one more technological mishap away from giving up on the week's task, so I knew that many of them would have strong opinions about SL to share with me. I had also worked with several groups that seemed to have mostly positive experiences, so I was hoping to receive a variety of student feedback.

The first way I gathered student opinions was through an informal e-mail survey. I e-mailed the students and asked them to write a short paragraph informing me of their experience working with SL throughout the semester. I provided some prompts for them, such as—*Did you benefit from the use of Second Life in your language learning experience? Did the use of Second Life hinder your learning in any way? What was your most frustrating experience with Second Life? What was your most valuable experience with Second Life?* Students could provide me with any other information they were inclined to submit as well, with the intention of being honest about their varied experiences. Here are a few excerpts of student responses, divided into positive and negative remarks:

Student Responses: Negative

"I think I was indifferent to the whole thing. Because we did it from home or the library... I know that a lot of people including myself occasionally used online dictionaries and translators instead of typing from scratch. Copy and pasting obviously doesn't help anyone's Spanish."

"Technology shouldn't replace human interaction. I think talking in class would have also helped me to gain better relationships with my peers.

"I do not enjoy things like online gaming which hindered me from being enthusiastic about what we had to do."

"My most frustrating experience with Second Life was that we were graded on how much we talked and how well we spoke, but we, at least I did, kept getting kicked off and would have to sign back in which would sometimes take 10-20 minutes."

"Even though it was only a half hour tops to meet, sometimes it proved difficult to work around everyone's work, class, and social schedules."

"I did not benefit from Second Life... I just don't think that it is an effective way to learn a foreign language, because the person is not required to actually speak the language."

Student Responses: Positive

"I personally liked Second Life... and I think would be a nice way to do foreign languages exclusively in the future... I also liked how it helped form bonds with other students in the class some of which I might not have talked to had they not been in my Second Life group."

"Second Life forced me to use Spanish more."

"The most valuable experience I had in Second Life was creating a grammatically correct skit with other students to perform. This greatly added to my language learning experience."

"In some ways I have benefited from using a virtual setting for language learning. More specifically typing/writing. This helped me see what I was saying which allowed me to correct my grammar and easily catch incorrect accents etc."

"I liked the creativity in Second Life with being able to build your own reality."

"What I liked about it is that it gave me a space where I could be freed from some of the social anxieties that come with not being able to communicate effectively in a second language."

This variety of student responses shows how diverse students are in their language abilities and learning styles. While some students claimed that using SL had no positive impact on their language learning, others argued just the opposite.

As another way of gauging student responses to SL, a post-test was also administered at the end of the semester to follow up with the pre-test given at the start. It is interesting to observe students' attitudes towards using computers for language learning and opinions on the effectiveness of SL in the foreign language classroom. Overall, opinions about the benefit of computers for improving language skills were only minimally changed from the pre-test to the post-test. Students seemed to agree that technology is effective in many settings, and that learning a foreign language should involve computers to some degree in order to enhance the educational experience. This stance stayed the same from the beginning of the semester to the end.

However, as another part of the post-test, students were asked to give their opinions on the effectiveness of specifically Second Life in learning Spanish, rather than simply computers and technology in general. Test items included statements such as, *Using Second Life helped me improve my Spanish; I would recommend using Second Life to other Spanish students; Using Second Life helped me get to know other students better; and I prefer using Second Life instead of traditional writing exercises*. Students indicated whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The post-test showed that many students preferred not to use Second Life as part of their foreign language curriculum. This could be due to a variety of factors, as previously discussed, but this did not surprise me. As I worked alongside students throughout the semester,

their frustrations became obvious in different situations—their avatars would not cooperate and do what they were supposed to do, their computers would freeze and would not allow them to chat, their schedules did not match up with mine or their group members' schedules, or any number of other problematic issues. Regardless of students' opinions on the effectiveness of computers in learning a foreign language, these regular setbacks put a bad taste in their mouths.

Conclusion

This experience was extremely valuable for me as I prepare to graduate and begin to put my own philosophy of foreign language education into practice. At the start of working with these Spanish 202 classes, I predicted that most students would have a positive experience with SL as part of the curriculum, specifically that *“students will enjoy working within Second Life as a way to acquire a second language, given the high aptitude that many young people have for using advanced technology.”* As a whole, this hypothesis was not entirely true, and not entirely false. While some students indicated that they enjoyed the experience and benefited from it, others completely disagreed and gave very clear feedback about how the program had even hindered their learning process. Apparently, the aptitude that students have for technology does not necessarily directly correlate with their desire to use SL and other similar programs as part of their curriculum.

If some circumstances had been different, I believe that many students' opinions would have changed. For example, some shared with me that the entire experience of using SL was ruined because it was used outside of class time, making it difficult to find time for all group members to meet. If they had been given in-class time to use the program, some stress would have been

eliminated and perhaps they would have reacted in a different way. In addition, SL is a relatively new and high-tech program, meaning that even the most technologically-savvy students were often not familiar with the complex program or did not own computers that could support such new software. This prevented many of them from being able to use the program to its full capacity, which often hindered their ability to perform each weekly task well.

Due to these constraints, many of these students began to think that SL was jeopardizing their grade. When this became a concern, they stopped thinking about the possible benefits and excitement of using technology in the curriculum and become quickly disillusioned as they saw their grades being affected by these issues. I found that students are not primarily concerned with stimulating new methods of learning a foreign language (though this can be exciting for them), but rather are chiefly concerned with their final grades. If they feel that any aspect of the curriculum is unfairly putting their grades at risk, their attitudes towards that part of the curriculum will be negative. I believe that is what happened with many of these students that were frustrated with the program. If they had been introduced to SL as part of a program that did require them to be formally evaluated, they might have come to completely different conclusions about the effectiveness of the program.

As I consider this experience in light of my own aspirations to use technology in my future classroom, I have learned a great deal about *how* and *when* to implement virtual worlds, chat-based programs, and other computer-based teaching methods. First of all, it is clear that my students will need to be well-equipped to use the right technology; if not, they will be at a disadvantage, especially at a high school level. In a college setting, students are able to access

high-tech university computer facilities, even if it is inconvenient at times, but this is not the case for high school students who have to rely on family resources. In addition, it may be fair to allow students alternative options to using programs like SL if they do not feel technologically competent in order to allow for multiple ability levels and learning styles. Perhaps virtual worlds do not need to be completely removed from the curriculum because some students do not feel comfortable using them, but rather provided as an engaging option for those who would see it for its benefits to language learning. There is no doubt that SL and similar programs offer huge advantages for learning a second language, but this cannot always be the central question. Instead, the individual students must be the main concern, and the curriculum should be adapted to them as often as possible.

It is not beneficial to implement technology into the foreign language classroom as a means in itself. Using technology must be a means to an end—increased proficiency in the second language. If computer programs such as Second Life or other new technological advances do not accomplish this goal, they should not be used as part of the curriculum.